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Response Paper 4, *Beloved*

The dehumanizing effect of slavery is an integral theme of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved.* Although the characters have escaped slavery and found freedom in present time, the story keeps bringing the reader to memories of a past of slavery to show the ways slavery impacted the characters. People who endure a life of slavery are affected physically, mentally, and spiritually. A past of slavery affects Sethe, the main character of the novel, so strongly that it causes her to lose trust in the world and impairs her decision making when it comes to knowing what is best for her children. Sethe is a woman with a great amount love to give. The reader learns she cannot handle this sudden freedom to love as she pleases once she escapes slavery (162). Her love is so strong that she will do anything to protect her babies from the world and slavery.

Before Sethe’s unfortunate experiences at Sweet Home, “long ago, she was soft, trusting (188).” At Sweet Home, the slaves were treated like animals. Sethe even overheard the schoolteacher teaching his pupils about all the “characteristics” that made Sethe an animal. In the harsh circumstances of slavery, it is not surprising that people begin to act like animals because it is hard to think of anything more than survival in this kind of cruel environment. Sethe’s experiences teach her that life is not valuable and can easily be taken by the hands of a white man. Sethe learns this early in life when her mother is hung. She has many other horrific experiences at Sweet Home that by the time she is free and safe at 124, she feels that “whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me (183).” This partially causes her to become alienated from the community, a support system that could have alleviated some of the damage of slavery and helped her make more rational decisions.

Sethe knows what it is like to live as a slave and believes it is her job to protect her children from what she knows is “terrible (165).” This causes Sethe to do what is considered an unforgiveable act by most people; she murders her “crawling already? Baby” in the presence of her other children (149). Her quick irrational decision because of the deep pain slavery etched into her negatively impacts those that surround her and her relationships later in life. When Paul D finds out about what Sethe did, he compares her to an animal saying “You got two feet, Sethe, not four (165).” In the present time, Sethe does not regret her actions caring only that “every bit of life she had made, all of the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful” were “where no one could hurt them” not realizing that she hurt them herself by giving them a horrifying experience that would haunt and alienate them for life (163). While her intentions are always good, a past of slavery impairs Sethe’s ability to be a good mother and to trust others.